



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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26 February 2007

**EGY102385.E**

Egypt: Treatment of Christians, including Coptic Christians, and availability of state protection (March 2004 - January 2007)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Several sources report that Christians face discrimination in Egypt (HRW Jan. 2007; US 15 Sept. 2006; Freedom House 1 Sept. 2006). More specifically, Freedom House reports that Egyptian Christians are subject to discrimination in employment, that they are denied authorization for building or repairing churches or face delays in obtaining such authorization, that several Coptic villagers have been killed and that there have been "frequent attacks on Coptic homes, businesses and churches in recent years" (1 Sept. 2006). The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report 2006* also reports that Christian churches faced difficulty or lengthy delays in obtaining building or renovation permits despite a presidential decree issued in December 2005 delegating permit approval to provincial governors and allowing basic repairs and maintenance subject to written notification (15 Sept. 2006, Sec. II; HRWF 19 Dec. 2005).

Although sources indicate that the government discriminates against Christians in public sector hiring practices and there are no Christians serving as heads of public universities (*The Christian Science Monitor* 8 Dec. 2005; US 15 Sept. 2006, Sec. II; UN 30 Oct. 2005), a Coptic Christian was appointed one of Egypt's 26 governors in early 2006 (MERIP 28 Apr. 2006; US 15 Sept. 2006, Sec. II), another was appointed a judge in the Supreme Constitutional Court and there is some representation of Christians in politics (ibid.). The United Nations (UN) Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) also states that Christians are discriminated against with regard to employment in the public sector; nevertheless, following the 2005 parliamentary elections, half of the executive appointments to the People's Assembly were Coptic Christians (17 Apr. 2006).

In April 2006, a Muslim man conducted a series of "knife attacks" at three Alexandria churches which resulted in the death of a Christian man, Noshi (or Nushi) Atta Girgis, and injuries to several other Christians (ibid.; MERIP 28 Apr. 2006; AFP 14 Apr. 2006; Senior Fellow 14 Oct. 2006, Para. 41.27). Clashes erupted between Muslims and Christians during the funeral of Girgis, which took place the following day, and resulted in injuries and arrests of several followers of both faiths (HRWF 18 Apr. 2006; MERIP 28 Apr. 2006; see also UN 17 Apr. 2006).

According to IRIN, even though relations between Christians and Muslims are "generally peaceful," two incidents of sectarian violence occurred in Egypt: one in October 2005 in the city of Alexandria and one in January 2006 in the city of Luxor (17 Apr. 2006). More specifically, the clash that erupted between Muslims and Christians in January 2006 took place in the village of el-Udaysaat, near the city of Luxor (AFP 20 Jan. 2006; UN 24 Jan. 2006; Compass 20 Jan. 2006; US 15 Sept. 2006, Sec. II). Hundreds of Muslims surrounded a building that had been used intermittently as an unlicensed Christian church and vandalized the property and attempted to set the building on fire (ibid.; AFP 20 Jan. 2006; Senior Fellow 14 Oct. 2006, Para. 41.22; Compass 20 Jan. 2006). Eleven Egyptians were reportedly injured and one Coptic Christian, Kamaal Shaker, was killed as a result of these events (ibid.; HRWF 21 Jan. 2006; Senior Fellow 14 Oct. 2006, Par. 41.22; AFP 20 Jan. 2006).

On 21 October 2005, a clash erupted between Muslims and Christians in the city of Alexandria as Muslims were angered by the distribution of a film that they considered offensive or derogatory towards Muslims (AFP 21 Oct. 2005; UN 30 Oct. 2005; CSCE 9 Nov. 2005). Although AFP reports that "there were no immediate reports of injuries or arrests" (21 Oct. 2005), IRIN indicates that three people were killed in the riots (UN 30 Oct. 2005) while other sources report that four Coptic Christians were killed (CSCE 9 Nov. 2005; Senior Fellow 14 Oct. 2006, Par. 41.21). Regarding these incidents of sectarian clashes and violence, the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) states that government officials and the media view them as exceptions to the rule of "national unity" (28 Apr. 2006).

The *International Religious Freedom Report 2006* indicates that, in April 2005, nine Coptic Christians received minor injuries in a fire that was set in an unlicensed church (US 15 Sept. 2006, Sec. II). Also in April 2005, Bahaa el-Akkad (or Baha Al-Accad), a Muslim sheikh, was arrested for "insulting Islam" and was imprisoned for converting to Christianity (Compass Direct News 18 Oct. 2006; US 15 Sept. 2006, Sec. II; Release International Dec. 2006). El-Akkad was still in detention as of December 2006 (ibid.).

According to an article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, sectarian violence in Egypt has increased because of discrimination against Copts (8 Dec. 2005). The article also reports that, in late 2004, there was a clash between police and thousands of Christians protesting the alleged forced conversion to Islam of a priest's wife (*The Christian Science Monitor* 8 Dec. 2005; see also MERIP 28 Apr. 2006). Agence France-Presse (AFP) reports that the remaining Christians still in detention for their participation in the protest were released in January 2005 (4 Jan. 2005).

The following information was provided to the Research Directorate by a Senior Fellow at the Center for Religious Freedom as an attachment dated 14 October 2006 in correspondence dated 10 January 2007:

The Copts, while usually having some freedom of worship, are threatened in varying degrees by terrorism from extreme Islamic groups, by the abusive and discriminatory practices of local police and security forces, by the frequent refusal of security officials to defend them or to prosecute those who have attacked them, and by systematically discriminatory and restrictive Egyptian Government policies. [...]

Since 1992, some Islamic groups ... have maintained that non-Muslims (in this context, Christians and Jews) should be given *dhimmi*, or separate and subordinate status, under *sharia* law, and must pay a special tax, *jizya*, to secure their protection. Those who refuse may have their homes or businesses attacked, and themselves or their families beaten, maimed, or killed. Several reports suggest that thousands of Copts have paid *jizya* in recent years and that dozens of Christians have been killed for failing to pay. [...]

... [W]hile the central government does not instigate, nor advocate, violence against the Copts, it will frequently, indeed usually, acquiesce in them by trying to cover up such attacks and refuse to investigate them aggressively.

At the local level, police may ignore, acquiesce, be complicit with, support, or even be members of radical groups. (Mohammed Atef, who many reports say was the military chief of Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda, was formerly an Egyptian policeman). Consequently the police may attack Christians themselves, or provide cover for those who do. In other cases the police may be intimidated into inaction by radicals, who may outnumber and outgun them. In other cases the police may simply be incompetent. Consequently Copts who are attacked often receive little help, and sometimes further repression, from police.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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#### Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources, including:** A Representative from the National Association for Human Rights and Development [Cairo] and the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights did not provide information within the time constraints for this Response.

**Internet sites:** *Al-Ahram* [Cairo], Amnesty International, *Catholic Insight*, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, Jubilee Campaign, Middle East News Agency, *Middle East Times* [Nicosia], Minority Rights Group International, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, US Copts Association.

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